

FAQs for the Humpback Whale Stranding on Long Island, NY  
April 2010

**1. Why was the animal not pushed off the beach?**

The logistical and physical constraints surrounding this case were significant. The whale was over 30 feet long and weighed approximately 13 tons (more than 26,000 pounds), which is the approximate size and weight of a large passenger city bus. There have only been a few successful efforts worldwide in towing a large whale back out to sea and not in the heavy surf conditions that were present in this case on Long Island. It would have also been inhumane to push an animal back out to sea without knowing the reason why it stranded in the first place. Large whales do not strand randomly; they usually strand because something is wrong.

**2. Was the whale's mother nearby offshore?**

No, this whale was a sub adult male estimated to be between 2-5 years of age. It was completely independent of its mother at the time of the stranding.

**3. Why did we change our decision from letting nature take its course to actively euthanize the animal?**

In its compromised state the animal was displaying signs that death could be imminent. However when the animal was still alive the next morning, the decision was made to humanely euthanize and end its suffering.

**4. Why did it take four days to successfully euthanize it?**

NOAA, Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation (RFMRP) and local authorities attempted to euthanize this animal as quickly and safely as possible. Unfortunately the large size and orientation of the animal in dangerous surf conditions hampered response efforts.

**5. Why didn't we let the volunteers from the public go into the water and push off the whale?**

Only highly trained and authorized personnel should respond to marine mammals in distress, especially large whales which can be extremely dangerous to work around because of their sheer size and mass. The Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research and Preservation is the officially authorized marine mammal responder in the state of New York by NOAA Fisheries, the federal agency responsible for administering the Marine Mammal Protection Act for cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) and most pinnipeds (seals and sea lions). Humpback whales are an endangered species protected by both the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act, so experts in whale biology and behavior must be in charge of rescue efforts to ensure that the animals are treated as humanely and carefully as possible.

**6. Why is it dangerous to be in the surf with a live whale?**

An animal of this size and mass could easily injure or kill a person with a swipe of its tail or pectoral fins. The whale was also rolling around in the surf which presented a grave danger to anyone in proximity of the animal.

**7. How was the whale euthanized?**

NOAA initially attempted to euthanize the whale in the surf with an overdose of anesthesia medications through a remote dart delivery system. It was far too dangerous for response personnel to initially work next to the whale and inject by hand, so the darts allowed for sedative drugs to be used to calm the whale. A combination of sedation, ballistics and chemical euthanasia were used to end the whale's suffering.

**8. Why didn't we try to rehabilitate it?**

There are simply no rehabilitation facilities available in the US that can accommodate an animal of that size and mass. Marine Mammal rehabilitation facilities routinely care for dolphins and small whales (e.g., pilot whales that are 12 feet long), but do not have the physical capabilities to care for an animal that is over 30 feet long and 13 tons.

**9. If the whale was compromised, why did we have such a hard time euthanizing it?**

Cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) have unique physiological and anatomical adaptations to live in the marine environment that make them much different from terrestrial mammals. Their metabolism and circulatory systems do not function like terrestrial mammals, so the use of traditional veterinary procedures are often not applicable or feasible. While we know a great deal about the health systems for elephants, cows, horses, dogs and cats, we still have much to learn about the health systems for cetaceans. The field of marine mammal medicine is still being pioneered and there are currently no universal standard dosages available in the medical literature for large whale sedation and humane euthanasia.

Furthermore, the orientation of the animal in the surf made standard euthanasia delivery difficult and dangerous for responders. We will not know until all analyses are completed what could have caused the stranding of the animal.

**10. Some animal welfare groups and other organizations oppose to use of lethal force to end suffering. Why don't you agree with that?**

Many large terrestrial animals are humanely relieved off their suffering with ballistics. NOAA Fisheries complies with American Veterinary Medicine Association guidelines for humane euthanasia and first worked to euthanize the animal by heavily sedating it. The whale was anesthetized and non-responsive when ballistics were used.

**11. Who made all the decisions regarding actions taken on the beach?**

NOAA was the ultimate authority for all decisions about the animal since it administers the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program and oversees all medical

activities for large whales. RFMRP was the local expert group on site authorized to assist with the response and worked with NOAA Fisheries and local authorities.

**12. Have live whales ever stranded in NY before?**

Yes, but it is a rare event.

**13. Have large whales like this ever been pushed off successfully?**

No, not to the best of our knowledge in NY. There have been a few cases of live large whales being pushed out to sea but they have been very rare events and it has not always been known whether or not the whale survived.

**14. Do baleen whales, like humpback whales, ever strand in groups?**

Baleen whales are more solitary animals than the smaller dolphins and almost always strand alone.

**15. Is it normal to see a humpback whale in NY?** Humpback whales have been reported in near shore waters of NY. They migrate along the east coast seasonally since they spend the summer months feeding up north in the Gulf of Maine and spend the winter months breeding and calving in the Caribbean.

**16. Did we get any reports of this whale before the morning of April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010?**

There are no known reports of the animal prior to April 6.

**17. Is the necropsy report going to be available to the public?**

Yes. The final report will be available after completion by the team of veterinarians and large whale biologists who worked on this case. It will take several weeks for the laboratory results to be completed on the tissues that were sampled from the whale.